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Memorial Day: FRCSE Gold Star mother remembers heroic son



Judy Hartman Alexander receives the flag that had lain over the casket of her only child, Sgt. Jonathan Hartman, from an Army officer. Sgt. Hartman lost his life in Iraq on April 17, 2004. (U.S. Navy Photo/Released)

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. -- “The soldier came to the door in his dress uniform, and as soon as I saw him – I knew,” Judy Hartman Alexander said of that Sunday in the spring of 2004. “You don’t have a Soldier come to the door in uniform just to say hello.

“I invited him in and he sat me down and told me Jonathan had been killed.”

The words washed over her, and everything began to blur.

The mischievous, red-headed boy who loved music, taking photographs and pretty girls – her only child – was gone. Her son’s battle, and life, was over.

Judy’s was just beginning.

Sgt. Jonathan Hartman was born in Portsmouth, Virginia in the bicentennial year of America’s independence. Like many boys, he grew up playing football and baseball. As an only child, he learned to make friends quickly.

“Jonathan treated everyone like they were family,” Judy said. “I always try to be kind to people and say hello, and I don’t think we know exactly how much we impart on our



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children. But I can see now that the lessons he learned as a child carried into his adulthood.”

As he grew, Jonathan also developed a fascination with flight. He and his mother were frequent visitors to air shows around coastal Virginia, especially after Judy took a job at Naval Aviation Depot Norfolk. The only problem was Jonathan sometimes wanted to get a little too close to the action.

“We were at an air show when he was 15 or 16, and he tried to tell the people in the tower that he was from our command and had permission to go up in the tower,” she said. “He was trying to see just how much he could get away with, and he wanted to be as up-close and personal to where the action was as possible.

“It’s a wonder he wasn’t put in jail.”

That love of flight endured after the Norfolk depot closed and Judy and Jonathan made the trip to Florida, where Judy went to work for Fleet Readiness Center Southeast (FRCSE), then known as Naval Aviation Depot Jacksonville. However, flying lessons were expensive, and he did like being “close to the action,” as Judy said. Jonathan realized he could join the Army and become a warrant officer, where he could learn how to fly, after enlisting for a few years.

“By this time he was an adult, so I wasn’t going to try to tell him what to do,” she said. “I just told him he needed to be very careful about the decisions he made.

“But I knew the military would be something that would be beneficial to him as far as the skills he would learn, the discipline he would learn and the friendships he would make.”

The Army assigned Jonathan to the 2nd Battalion, 37th Armored Regiment, 1st Armored Division, stationed in Friedberg, Germany. He thrived.

“He loved being in Germany because he could hop on the train and go to other countries,” Judy said. “Everything about being in the Army in Germany was good for him.

“Guys, even to this day, talk about knowing him in Germany, how he took care of them, how he helped them learn and become the soldiers or men they are today.”

Two years after Jonathan enlisted, the world changed on Sept. 11, 2001. Battle plans were no longer theoretical exercises based on an imaginary enemy. It was real. American Abrams tanks played a crucial role in the initial invasion of Iraq, but the men of Jonathan’s unit remained in Germany.

Jonathan longed to be close to the action, his mother said.

“He wanted to go to Iraq where the action was,” she said. “He was thinking the whole thing



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would be over before he got a chance to get a piece of the action.”

Unknown to enlisted men and generals alike, Operation Iraqi Freedom was just beginning. In May 2003, Jonathan’s “Iron Dukes” unit deployed to central Baghdad. The following spring, the unit learned they would not be going home in April. Like many other units in the first years of the war in Iraq, their tour would be extended.

On April 17, 2004, the unit left for Najaf in a 75-vehicle convoy. Due to the distance and their tanks’ limited gas mileage, the tanks were loaded onto flatbed trucks with the crews still manning their positions inside the tanks.

“They approached the town of Diwaniyah and something was in their way on the road, so they changed directions,” she said. “The road that they went down had an ambush set up.

“The lead Humvee was attacked and a Soldier was killed. When that happened, it stopped the convoy.”

Jonathan was in the tank commander’s hatch in the lead tank and began returning fire with a .50 caliber machine gun when he slumped down in the cupola from a fatal gunshot wound to the chest.

A five-hour firefight ensued that saw the tanks break their chains that held them to the trucks and take the fight to the insurgents, eventually sending them fleeing into the night.

Back in Jacksonville, after the casualty assistance officer left, Judy began calling her family. The commanding officer of Naval Aviation Depot Jacksonville, Capt. David Beck, and his wife stopped by to offer their condolences.

Most would expect a grieving mother to take an extended leave of absence from work. Judy did not.

“The next day, I went to work,” she said. “We started working on my next mission, which was the message that I wanted to put out to the American people about Jonathan: He loved his country, loved The Lord, and loved being a Soldier. I was not going to blame anyone for his death.”

With help from family and friends from church, Judy made it through the whirlwind of media attention, well-wishers and funeral services. Her coworkers also came to her aid.

“Working here at FRCSE was like having 3,000 people in my family,” she said. “People did things that I could not believe. My friends in the public affairs office helped me write words and scan pictures.

“There was a group of managers who got together and paid to have his uniforms put in shadow boxes. There were carpenters here who made the shadow boxes for them to be



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put in. Everyone did anything they could to let me know, “Hey, we love you. We loved Jonathan. We appreciate his sacrifice. We will never forget you. We will never forget him.”

Though she could’ve had Jonathan buried in Arlington National Cemetery, she instead chose a cemetery closer to her family’s home near Waynesville, Ohio. There he is buried in a veteran’s section where a restored tank casts its shadow over the last resting places of those who’ve served the United States.

She still feels enormous gratitude to Jonathan’s fellow Iron Dukes, she said.

“I’m thankful to all those guys for doing the job they did, because I was able to have Jonathan come home,” Judy said. “He had a closed casket, but I wanted to see him and I was able to see him. That gave me a lot of peace.”

Memorial Day, the meaning of which is often overlooked in a rush towards summer, has taken on an intimate, personal meaning to Judy. It began the day she laid Jonathan to rest in the Corwin cemetery.

“I remember after his funeral, we stopped at a little convenience store and got some newspapers for a few copies of his obituary,” she said. “I was thinking the world should just stop. You shouldn’t be laughing and buying things. You shouldn’t be working. You should stop ... for just a moment and realize that a great man is gone.

“So I guess that’s kind of what I think of on Memorial Day now. We can have fun. We can cookout. We can go to the beach. We can do a lot of fun things, but at some point on that day we should just stop and remember that great men and women are gone. They’re not with us anymore because they gave their lives for this great country.”





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Sgt. Jonathan Hartman (U.S. Navy Photo/Released)



Judy Hartman Alexander looks down at the grave of her only child, Army Sgt. Jonathan Hartman, who lost his life in Iraq on April 17, 2004. He is laid to rest in the veteran's section of a cemetery near her family's home in Corwin, Ohio. (U.S. Navy Photo/Released)